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Global Unions as imperfect multilateral organizations: An international relations perspective

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Abstract

This study applies an international relations framework and the notion of multilateral organizations as a means of understanding the nature of trade union internationalism and the conditions under which it operates. The authors argue that international trade unionism involves an imperfect multilateralism which requires close working relationships between small groups of unions in order to function, that is, a 'minilateral' method of working. By using this framework the authors attempt to highlight the intrinsic durability and adaptability of the Global Unions and also identify areas of activity that serve to strengthen them as organizations, primarily by building affiliates' engagement and investment in them.

Keywords

Global Unions, international organization, international trade union movement, minilateralism, multilateralism

Introduction

Much of the literature on the international trade union movement is under-theorized. International trade union organizations comprise numerous affiliates with marked differences in membership strength and material resources, and conflicting ideologies and identities. How in practice are policies shaped and decisions taken? Formal constitutional provisions tell us little. As an approach to an answer, we apply an international relations framework, and in particular the notion of multilateral organizations, as a means

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of understanding the nature of trade union internationalism, the conditions under which it operates and the problems which it currently faces.

The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is an international organization of national trade union confederations. It has 305 affiliated member organizations from 151 countries and territories, with a total membership of 176 million workers. It is closely linked to the international organizations of occupational or industrial trade unions, the 10 Global Union Federations (GUFs) (previously known as International Trade Secretariats), which date back in some cases to the late 19th century. Together the ITUC and GUFs have adopted the collective label 'Global Unions'. The relative lack of attention among academics and the general public to international trade unionism is curious when one bears in mind that they are, along with faith groups, the world's largest membership organizations. They have great though often hidden influence on other international bodies, national governments, trade union movements and civil society. Yet their very size is indicative of the problem we address here: the difficulty for very large democratic organizations to operate effectively.

Archer (2001: 33) defines international organizations as 'formal, continuous structure[s] established by agreement between members . . . with the aim of pursuing the common interest of the membership' and with core functions which include norm and rule setting and providing information, socialization and articulation between members. This definition clearly applies to the Global Unions, which even more than most other international organizations are founded on the principle of internal democracy (Webb and Webb, 1920). In order to operate successfully, they must not only act efficiently on behalf of their membership but be able to engage their membership in order to achieve their objectives (Offe and Wiesensthal, 1985). We argue that the existence of multilateral structures is necessary for genuinely global trade union activity to take place, but that what exists is an imperfect multilateralism which requires close working relationships between small groups of unions in order to function effectively. We further argue that union capacity to carry out international solidarity action requires a robust relationship between members which can only be developed by working in a 'minilateral' way with small groups of affiliates.

For most of its history, international trade unionism has been beset by ideological, regional and organizational cleavages. Most of the literature has focused on ideological cleavages, with the primary dividing lines being between social-democratic, Christian and communist organizations (Carew, 1987; MacShane, 1992). At its creation in 2006, the ITUC united for the first time affiliates of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the inheritor of the social-democratic tradition, and most of the affiliates of the much smaller World Confederation of Labour (WCL), derived from the Christian tradition, along with a number of important ex-communist unions (previously affiliated to the World Federation of Trade Unions, WFTU) and other independent unions. What were once inter-organizational ideological divisions now had to be managed within the new unified organization. The second major basis for division, geographical differences, is more significant today than ever. There have long been significant differences between the ideas, practices and priorities of the unions of the industrialized countries and those of the industrializing countries. All the Global Unions have their headquarters in Europe, mainly in Brussels and Geneva, where the weight of

membership and financial resources has always been concentrated, although most of them also possess regional structures including committees, offices and staff. The regional structures do not necessarily resolve the differences of interests, resources and perspective between these two groups. A third basis for division is the more practical one between organizations like the ITUC and its predecessors (ICFTU, etc.), which are based on national centres, and the GUFs, based on industrial unions. While the GUFs retain a formal autonomy in the new structures, they are now more closely linked to the new global body, the ITUC, but it remains to be seen how effectively this closer link will operate in practice.

What do Global Unions do, and why do they do it?

Scholars and practitioners of international trade unionism give different answers to the questions of why unions act internationally, and what they do. Many view trade union internationalism as a response to the internationalization of both product and labour markets, which entails that wages and working conditions can no longer be defended by action purely at the national level. This was the position of Charles Levinson, general secretary of the International Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation, who led the drive for World Company Councils in the 1960s and 1970s (Levinson, 1972). In recent years this challenge has been conceptualized in terms of globalization, with the growing power of multinational companies (MNCs), the unequal relationship between rich and poor nations and the threat of a 'race to the bottom' in terms of labour costs and employer practices (Logue, 1980; Ramsay, 1997, 1999). Similar arguments, however, were made by early advocates of international trade union organization, such as Edo Fimmen, general secretary of the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) (Fimmen, 1924). Other authors present the case for a transnational trade union response in terms of solidarity, a concept which refers both to the principle of common action with others and to the identification of one's own interests with theirs (Hyman, 1999; Lorwin, 1953; Zoll, 1996). For members of the Global Unions, this involves the commitment to support other members in response to conflicts with employers, both locally and internationally, in order to protect standards for working people everywhere. Solidarity can however be conceived in two contrasting senses: first, as a normative or moral principle which creates an obligation to support other workers and their unions in case of need; second, as a form of 'enlightened self-interest' (Collier, 2008: 247; Logue, 1980; Ramsay, 1997) with only weakly ethical underpinning, motivated by the belief that an injury to one is (sooner or later) an injury to all. The tension between these two conceptions of solidarity has generated dilemmas for international trade union organization, in part because the practical benefits of solidarity actions are often difficult to identify and take many years to bear fruit.

A second dilemma concerns the orientation of action. This may be internal, focused around the sector or industry the organization represents, particularly in the case of the GUFs and their predecessors: Global Unions seek to align the policies and activities of affiliates in order to pool resources and prevent damaging downwards pressure on standards. The rationale is that effective collective action will enable unions through their own efforts to counteract the challenges of globalization.

The other orientation is external, focused on action at a more general and political level. The ITUC in particular has conceived much of its role in terms of engaging with other actors at international level, especially the International Labour Organization (ILO) and other UN institutions. The International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), a predecessor of today's ITUC, was deeply involved in the creation of the ILO in 1919 (Van Goethem, 2000: 80–82) and was a ready-made interlocutor for the new organization. Within the ILO's tripartite structure – its Governing Body draws half its members from national governments and a quarter each from workers' and employers' organizations – the ITUC and its predecessors the ICFTU and IFTU have always effectively controlled the workers' side. To an important extent, the ITUC (like its forerunners) and the ILO confer legitimacy and recognition on each other. This relationship has become increasingly important in recent years, as globalization has brought international labour relations affairs into greater prominence, and as a result of institutional change within the UN system, in particular within the ILO (Fröhlich, 2007). These changes were stimulated by a number of international developments (Haworth and Hughes, 2003) including the end of the Cold War, increased concern about social protection and the linking of world trade and labour standards. The ITUC has strongly supported the 'decent work' agenda launched in 1999 by the newly appointed ILO director-general, Juan Samová. Closely linked to this agenda was the priority given – from among the multiplicity of ILO conventions – to a set of core labour standards relating to freedom of association and collective bargaining, prevention of forced labour, elimination of the worst forms of child labour and prevention of discrimination in employment.

Similarly, while the GUFs have long focused on MNCs, work on this issue has become even more important following the recent process of company mergers and acquisitions (Schmidt, 2002). This process has stimulated a new area of work for the GUFs in their efforts to resist the competitive downwards pressure by MNCs on national standards. National unions lack the capacity to influence corporate policy without concerted international cooperation, and the response has therefore been the attempt to negotiate transnational agreements, usually in the form of International Framework Agreements (IFAs).

These global developments have increased the incentives for national unions to cooperate globally, providing both concrete benefits but also broader advantages, such as providing thinking, coordination and opportunities for joint action. But Global Unions are faced with an internal conflict between two competing realities of supply and demand. The first reality stems from their success in affiliating trade unions from outside the OECD countries which provided their traditional core, and the fact that their legitimacy demands that this process of recruitment continue, perhaps even to include China. Yet in most non-OECD countries, unions have few fee-paying members (even though they may attract wide-scale support), whereas membership numbers (and hence financial resources) have been declining throughout the traditional industrialized world. The second is that, as indicated above, the need for effective international trade unionism becomes ever greater with the acceleration of economic internationalization, itself driven by the priorities of the international financial institutions (IFIs) and key national governments (notably the USA), which the Global Unions strive to little effect to counteract.

There are enormous cultural, organizational and political differences between unions that make cooperation particularly difficult at the international level. It is hard for new

and even sometimes established member unions fully to understand the position of other members or to appreciate how to navigate an international setting, even with today's greater possibilities for transport and communication. The language barrier remains significant at the world level, especially for less educated trade unionists, and it remains one of the key capacities of the Global Unions to integrate information and experience from a diverse membership and use it not only to facilitate communication between them but also to forge common values and priorities for action. This is essential for all international organizations: as Kratochwil argues (1993: 448), a central function of international organizations 'is the interpretation of the "facts" and inferences about motivations', and Windmuller (1967, 1987) and others agree that this is equally true of the day-to-day work of the Global Unions.

Global Unions: The regional dimension and the issue of resources

The work of the Global Unions can be divided into three main areas (Croucher and Cotton, 2009). The first is the defence of affiliated unions, usually through direct solidarity action in response to a particular dispute or problem. The second is to further the interests of trade unions within international and intergovernmental organizations, in recent years mainly through pursuing international negotiations with employers, using company networks and IFAs. The third is capacity-building for unions in less developed parts of the world, carried out primarily through long-term development work, in particular education programmes.

The ICFTU was the first peak-level international trade union organization to establish regional organizations for the Americas (including both North and South America), Asia and Africa shortly after its foundation in 1949; its rivals the largely communist WFTU and the Christian CISC, predecessor of the WCL, soon followed suit. In the new climate of the Cold War trade union organization was seen as an essential part of a greater ideological battle. De-colonization offered many opportunities for trade union growth in newly independent states, where trade unions had often played a key role in the independence struggle. All three internationals found themselves competing for affiliates, a competition that created opportunities for corruption and opportunism on all sides. Many of the organizational problems evident today originated in the 1960s, particularly the struggle of the regional structures to achieve a sustainable basis of paying affiliates and to reduce the reliance on externally funded projects. By the early 1990s the GUFs were establishing regional structures and offices, directing the bulk of their dues income towards building a genuinely global membership. This included integrating unions from the former Soviet Union and attempting to incorporate unions from the Middle East. At the European level, the ICFTU also set up a European regional organization, which became moribund and then gave way in 1973 to the independent European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which soon admitted affiliates of the WCL and former affiliates of WFTU. The rise of an autonomous European regional body thus paved the way for the foundation of the ITUC, but also encouraged a greater focus on European affairs among European trade unions, sometimes to the detriment of international trade union solidarity (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000b; Windmuller, 1976). As Traub-Merz and Eckl (2007: 4)

have noted, ‘organisational autonomy necessitated a division of labour which repeatedly called for difficult compromises – especially on issues affecting European foreign-trade interests – between an ETUC with a more protectionist profile and an ICFTU bound to solidarity with trade unions from developing countries’.

There have been marked variations both within and between the regions in terms of economic and social development, levels of trade union membership and financial and organizational resources. At the beginning of the 1970s, union organization was relatively strong in Asia, while in Africa it was clearly weakest, meaning that effective regional organization was possible only with substantial external support (Croucher and Cotton, 2009). The majority of the Global Unions brought together two completely distinct regions, North and South America, with the USA and Canada largely subsidizing this work. In the case of the ICFTU, the regional body ORIT (Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores) was widely criticized as a channel for US foreign policy, supporting corrupt and unrepresentative but anti-communist Latin American unions in the 1960s and 1970s, before a ‘clean up’ in the 1980s (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000b). In contrast, the WCL had a separate regional organization for South America, CLASC (later renamed CLAT) (Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores) that prided itself on its autonomy from North America and gained considerable influence among all those opposed to the US domination of ORIT. How to deal with the Americas was to be one of the most contentious issues in the creation of the ITUC and has been resolved only by the creation of regional sub-structures which allow North and South America to operate largely independently. A different issue arose in the case of Europe, where – as noted above – the ETUC was autonomous from the Global Unions. The solution was to create a Pan-European Regional Council (PERC) within the ITUC; the ETUC general secretary holds the same office within PERC. In practice, the latter focuses on trade union issues in Eastern Europe, beyond the boundaries of the European Union (EU).

The ETUC and ITUC share a headquarters building, the International Trade Union House in Brussels. But the European organization is significantly better resourced. Though the ITUC charges its wealthiest affiliates higher affiliation fees than the ETUC – in 2010, €197 per thousand members as against €161 – the majority of ETUC membership belongs to the higher-fee affiliates, whereas the opposite is the case with the ITUC. In addition, the ETUC benefits from substantial resources from the EU, in particular for its research, education and health and safety agency, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI). The differences are reflected in staffing. The ITUC, with its global remit, lists 74 headquarters staff in 2011. The ETUC lists 52, with an additional 64 in the ETUI. The latter has 20 research staff with a direct input into the ETUC policy process; the three ITUC policy departments (Human and Trade Union Rights, Economic and Social Policy and Equality) together have 17.

For many unions in developing and transition countries, contact with a Global Union was their first possibility to establish relationships with trade unions outside their own country, and sometimes inside, on a basis of relative equality. In most parts of the world, in particular in countries under military dictatorships and in the former Communist bloc, trade unions, and in particular any international contacts, were heavily controlled by governments. Subsequently, democratization often went hand in hand with economic liberalism, and unions faced dramatic changes in the structure of their industries and the

employment relationship, and often faced foreign employers for the first time. Affiliation to a Global Union was thus a highly attractive option and provided both contact with the outside world and internal prestige as well as educational and financial resources for union work. This was particularly pronounced in the case of the former Soviet Union. Unions in these countries typically cost more for the Global Unions in development aid than they bring in affiliation fees.

As noted earlier, unions in most developed countries have experienced a steady decline in the number of workers paying subscriptions (Visser, 2011). This is in part due to increased unemployment but also the shift from manufacturing to private services, and more recently the squeeze on public sector employment, which almost universally is a trade union stronghold. Also of great importance is the growth of insecure working arrangements such as short-term contracts, temporary agency work, homeworking, subcontracting and 'dependent self-employment'. While the extent of the 'informal economy' has long presented a serious obstacle to unionization in developing countries, the growth of precarious work forms in OECD countries has similar effects (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011; Heery and Salmon, 2000; Standing, 2011).

These developments are to an important extent associated with the rise of neoliberalism, which has driven the promotion of employment flexibility and encouraged deregulation of markets more generally, and has greatly empowered the global corporations (Crouch, 2011). The latter have put pressure on traditionally well-organized industrial sectors (Hayter, 2009; Holdcroft, 2009) and regions through the exploitation of global production chains. Such trends have been a major focus of analysis and pressure by the Global Unions, though with limited success in stemming the neoliberal tide.

Precarious workers are difficult to organize for a broad range of reasons. Precarious work is dominated by women and ethnic minorities who have traditionally been weakly organized by unions in most parts of the world outside Scandinavia (Wrench and Virdee, 1996; Young, 2009). Perceived vulnerability to job loss and victimization also make unionization difficult. In some countries, moreover, there are specific legal constraints on the right of workers on 'atypical' contracts to organize and to bargain collectively (ILO, 2009).

These changes in the employment relationship have provoked a profound questioning and repositioning of trade union activity and structures, not least in how unions organize (Frege and Kelly, 2004; Phelan, 2007; Webster et al., 2008). Unions have in most parts of the world attempted to find new organizing techniques to reach new industries and work arrangements, such as the use of online campaigning and recruiting (Hayter, 2009; Lee, 1996). However there is little evidence that a 'new' organizing model has enabled unions to replace previously permanent memberships with precarious ones.

Membership decline has been reflected in a reduction of payments to the Global Unions, and often an increased incidence of late payment of affiliation fees, a significant problem for the international organizations which possess few if any financial reserves. Financial information is not readily available for all the Global Unions, but reports from the ICFTU and ITUC give a broad indication of trends. According to the ICFTU Millennium Review in 2000–1, total income was US\$60 million per year from membership dues, additional donations and development cooperation funds raised externally. Between 1999 and 2003, an additional US\$70 million of donations and project funds

Table 1. Declared and paying membership and fees received per region, ICFTU 1998 and 2003, ITUC 2009.

Region	Declared membership (000)			Paying membership (000)			Fees (€ 000)		
	1998	2003	2009	1998	2003	2009	1998	2003	2009
Central/East Europe	8,235	37,296	47,956	8,048	11,301	25,761	116	195	282
West Indies	420	383	220	424	387	182	3	4	5
Western Europe	43,214	43,638	46,204	37,595	36,234	36,127	5,403	5,863	6,671
North America	14,612	12,362	10,389	14,612	12,362	10,354	2,216	1,647	1,982
Africa	8,942	10,591	13,880	8,454	10,254	12,171	132	68	97
Asia and Pacific	27,907	27,283	32,248	18,112	14,708	18,082	1,468	1,490	1,652
Latin America	19,362	16,468	24,510	19,254	7,439	16,001	30	4	103
Middle East	748	1,274	1,282	745	1,271	1,284	38	5	57
Total	123,441	149,294	176,689	107,244	93,957	119,963	9,406	9,277	10,848

Source: ICFTU Financial Reports 2004; ITUC Financial Report 2010.

were channelled through its regional structures. During the period 1994–2001 real value fee receipts per member dropped by 22%. Despite an increase in declared membership of 28 million during 1999–2003, there was a drop of 12.4% in paying membership. The ITUC reported a rise in declared membership of more than 10 million between 2007 and 2009, but paying membership barely increased. Table 1 presents fees received by region for the ICFTU in 1998 and 2003, and for the ITUC in 2009. It is important to note that affiliation fees are weighted by the level of national income in each country; in 2009 the fee was €191.45 per thousand members for unions from the richest countries, only €3.1 for those from the poorest; the GUFs have similar arrangements, as has the ETUC. This weighting means that any fall in paying membership in the wealthiest countries has a disproportionate impact on the resources of the Global Unions.

In addition to financial resources, intangible resources such as technical expertise and political influence are also unevenly distributed across the Global Unions. Historically, the staff of Global Unions have tended to come from the most developed countries, in particular from the Low Countries, the Nordic countries, and more recently the English-speaking countries. The leading role of certain nationalities is even apparent at the regional level: English speakers from the Indian sub-continent long dominated Asian regional affairs, although their place has now largely been taken by the Japanese. The higher level of education and greater language knowledge of citizens of these countries is probably the main reason for this phenomenon, but these are also the richest and most influential affiliates, and their over-representation within the staff only adds to the imbalance within the global trade union structures.

As a result of the imbalance of funds and concentration of expertise among staff at the secretariat level, regional organizations have tended to act as recipients of policies or resources, rather than initiators. Although the Global Unions vary constitutionally in the status and structure of regions, all are to some degree centralized decision-making bodies. Their formal decision-making structures have evolved over time to reflect their

changing membership composition, and in particular to improve the representation of women and of affiliates from the developing and transition countries. Most base formal voting power on the number of dues-paying members, and suspend the voting rights of affiliates who fail to pay their fees. However, formal voting generally occurs only at the end of the decision-making process, leaving the core policy and strategy decisions to regional and international committee meetings and informal negotiations between the leaders of key affiliates who play a leading role on these committees and contribute the bulk of resources (usually the Germans, Nordics, North Americans and Japanese).

This is not to say that a union's international influence depends only on membership numbers and financial contributions. Authority, understood as the ability to act upon others or upon organizational structures, also derives from internal qualities (knowledge, experience, strength of personality or resilience). There are a number of different types of authority held by unions beyond contribution authority, based on political and moral weight (Croucher and Cotton, 2009). Political authority changes over time, with the South African unions having come to represent one of the most admired political movements. Moral authority comes through a union's ability to withstand extreme pressure: currently unions from Colombia and Iraq are seen as having an exceptional position in international activities because of the climate in which they operate. Over the history of the international trade union movement, there have been a number of influential leaders from the developing countries, but this does not change the general imbalance of resources and influence.

In addition to affiliation fees, the ITUC receives roughly €1 million a year in voluntary contributions to its Solidarity Fund, just over half coming from its German and Japanese affiliates. Far more substantial – about €7 million a year – are the project-oriented Development Aid Funds. Almost half this funding is provided by the Dutch government and trade unions, with other substantial contributions from the Swedish unions and the ILO. These are advanced and well-organized funding sources but largely depend on the political support of national governments. Given the political shifts in Western Europe, the funds are increasingly dependent on the ability to show concrete outputs and benefits for the donor countries. In many cases, these funds are earmarked for specific projects, often entailing a bilateral relationship between donor and recipient countries and unions. This bilateralism can be seen as subversive of the broader collective solidarity which the Global Unions aim to represent (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000b, 2001).

Another observable trend has been for unions to turn their focus inward towards their own regions. This is especially true in Europe, where unions have increasingly focused on intra-regional relationships and on the EU structures at the expense of wider international work (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000a, 2002). On some analyses, the unions of Western Europe – the Global Unions' main paymasters – have come to regard European economic integration as a more immediate concern than globalization, privileging their relationship with the ETUC. The latter, in its most recent Activity Report (ETUC, 2011), a 100-page document, devoted just three pages to global issues. This can be understood as another threat to the Global Unions, which require the substantial contributions of their wealthier affiliates to achieve collective goals. A similar phenomenon has arisen in the Asian-Pacific region, where the numerical and financial weight of the Japanese confederation RENGO allows it to dominate trade union developments in Asia (as the unions of the Indian sub-continent did before it).

Politically, both the imbalance of power and resources between regions and the increasing internal focus within regions are problematic for the Global Unions. Bilateral and regional organization leaves the power dynamics between trade unions from the global North and South intact, subordinating international priorities to the interests of the key players. When their interests change, the arrangement itself may prove precarious. A key advantage of multilateralism is that it is an attempt to govern globally, and as a result the participation of all affiliates is sought, which in turn implies a high degree of democratization affecting levels of communication between the governed and the governing and rules and accountability for Global Union officials.

Despite the generally accepted need for trade unions to have international multilateral structures, the affiliates of the Global Unions have proved remarkably reluctant to address an evident resource crisis. Unions facing declining membership at home naturally find it difficult to commit to paying higher amounts to their international organizations. Yet what is striking is the lack of argument and energy devoted to the problem by national affiliates within their own structures and decision-making bodies, perhaps reflecting an ambivalence towards membership of the Global Unions. There is, we argue, a tension between the broad principles of multilateralism and the specific and complex actions required to carry them out. This is clear in the case of solidarity: the policy itself is virtually unchallengeable among trade unions, but there is far less consensus on the specific and demanding actions needed in order for these principles to be pursued at global level.

We attempt in the following section to use international relations theories to understand this tension. After introducing the concepts of multilateralism and multi-level governance, we discuss Olson's 'problem of large numbers', which suggests that organizations with large membership will always struggle to develop the motivation to participate actively in multilateral structures, threatening their organizational coherence. We refer briefly to the literature on institutional entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions and policy communities, then turn to Kahler's notion of 'minilateralism' – the practice of working in smaller groups with a resulting higher degree of consensus, clarity and closeness – in order to conceptualize the development of more robust international relationships between unions. This entails a 'disguised' multilateralism where minilateral relations are framed within a multilateral structure. Using the idea developed by Ruggie of the 'elasticity' of multilateral structures, we conclude that multilateralism as a concept has 'heuristic fruitfulness' (Kratochwil, 1993: 443) in relation to the durability of the global unions.

Placing Global Unions within an international relations theoretical frame

Multilateralism and multi-level governance

Though multilateralism is a dominant characteristic of international institutions, it is still a relatively weakly defined concept. A definition widely used in international relations literature is by Ruggie:

... an institutional form that coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of generalized principles of conduct; that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularist interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies that may exist in any specific occurrence. (Ruggie, 1993: 77)

Caporaso (1993: 54) adds that multilateralism is also a 'conception of how the world might be organized'. Multilateralism can apply broadly to international regimes, rules and decision-making procedures, such as the international labour standards regime (Haworth and Hughes, 2003) and more formalized organizations such as the ILO. Multilateral regimes, in essence, involve working relationships between states on the basis of agreed rules and principles, and offer a structure where states can potentially develop an agenda for global governance.

Two important characteristics of multilateralism that Ruggie emphasizes are that it is both durable and adaptive. These characteristics are in part a consequence of the kinds of principles on which multilateral organizations are based: they apply to all members and across all particular moments in time or interests. This gives multilateral arrangements their adaptive and 'reproductive' capacity. In addition, most multilateral regimes or organizations rely on the intense cooperation and investment of sub-sets of members, who are willing to sustain organization despite the higher costs they incur, as we discuss later through the concept of 'k-groups'.

The principles and activities of a multilateral form need to resonate with domestic environments, or to reflect the values and cultures of key members. Ruggie (1993: 10) points to the cohesive effect of collective defence against an external force: multilateral organization constitutes a 'collective-security system'. Elsewhere (Ruggie, 1982), in his discussion of 'embedded liberalism', he notes that the post-1945 global governance regime was shaped by US dominance and development of a free trade agenda. It can be argued that the supposed benefits of entering into a system of embedded liberalism have never been realized in developing countries (Bull and McNeill, 2007), because it has not provided sufficient benefits to compensate for the negative effects of involvement in international markets and free trade regimes.

The interaction between actors at national and supranational levels is a key theme of the literature on multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2003). This concept, developed primarily in analysis of the EU, points to the process of negotiation and accommodation between national and supranational (and sometimes also sub-national) actors as an essential ingredient in successful policy formation. The multi-level character of multilateralism and supranationalism is an essential insight for the study of trade union internationalism.

Generalized principles

As suggested earlier, the key 'generalized principle' underlying trade union multilateralism is the idea of solidarity. In abstract terms this has resonance with trade union members, but educational and campaigning activities by national unions are often necessary to reinforce and make real this sense of solidarity among the membership, particularly younger members who do not automatically identify with solidarity as an

ideologically based ideal. However, within trade union membership there is often a deep understanding of the importance of collectivism, a key motivator for joining a union and a real and evident benefit to members. Such understanding profoundly shifts the perception of the importance of alliances with workers in other locations, including other countries (Zoll, 1996).

This idea of solidarity as 'enlightened self-interest' (Logue, 1980) is a long way from the internationalism which underlies early international socialist trade unionism, although Fimmen (1924) managed to combine the two approaches. Early Christian trade unionism was also based on solidarity, although it was closer to the Christian conception of charity. The contemporary concept of solidarity is not explicitly anti-capitalist and steers away from political ideology, particularly since the integration of the socialist and Christian traditions. Rather it focuses on a more pragmatic conception, that there are common interests among workers internationally, however weakly defined. It does, however, link to the objectives of the 'post-cold war internationalists' (Goldmann, 1994: 2–3) who have driven the development of global economic and political institutions in order to promote a world 'order' and find common ground or 'co-existence'.

Another key organizational principle of the Global Unions is subsidiarity, where the main power resides in local or regional structures with the central body carrying a framework-setting, coordinating and monitoring function. Marleau (2006) describes subsidiarity as also providing an 'articulating device', a way for different levels from local to central to find a way of linking within one structure. In the case of trade unions we can see that this idea of subsidiarity matches closely the doctrine of solidarism, a principle of social organization where individual and collective interests are interdependent and form a dialectical relationship. Marleau argues that this principle forms the basis for EU regulation and the ILO's international standards, and the same is clearly true of the Global Unions, although they tend to place more emphasis on the coordinating function of the top level.

This generalized nature of the principles and the obligation between members helps explain the adaptability and subsequent durability of multilateral organizations. The principles are 'principles of indivisibility', that is they are not based on any particular set of interests and therefore exist and survive beyond particular circumstances.

Self-interest, diffuse reciprocity and the problem of large numbers

The concept of collective or public goods is undeveloped in international relations, but has received growing attention since the 1990s, with the discussion of global public goods (Stiglitz, 1999), revived interest in social justice (Long and Woolley, 2009) and failure of the WTO Doha round negotiations (Gallagher and Stoler, 2009). Organizations generally provide collective goods which benefit both members and non-members (Olson, 1965: 15), although most will also provide selective or private goods as an incentive to membership. One of the collective benefits of affiliation to a Global Union is increased power in relation to employers; a private good could be, for example, the increased leverage with employers of those unions participating in the negotiation of an IFA.

The net benefit of any collective good, as understood in traditional international relations theory, declines as total membership increases: a larger group is less efficient in

providing a large amount of a collective good because of the reduction in identification between members, increased costs of organizing diverse memberships and reduced incentive for individual members to contribute. Large groups may lack the level of connection between members to generate sufficient levels of solidarity or persuasion for each member to believe that the benefits of cooperation justify the costs (Hardin, 1982).

We would argue, however, that the size of membership for trade unions is a benefit in and of itself and as a result the collective good increases significantly with increased membership. Being a member of what are perhaps the largest membership organizations in the world is itself a collective good, and is perceived as such by trade unionists. This perception in turn defines the interests of members and therefore what self-interest comes to mean. For example, the function of interlocution with international organizations, where the size of membership necessarily increases legitimacy and power, is something which national trade unions would be unable to replicate through a 'myopic' pursuit of self-interest (Oye, 1986: 229–231).

Self-interest is also significant here, for example economic self-interest as a motivation for international organization by industrial sector or occupation. The classic explanation for international solidarity action relates to the elimination of competition over labour costs within a given company or industry. It closely fits the reasons behind the ITF's successful international campaign to organize sea-farers, which remains the most successful of all Global Union actions to this day (Northrup and Rowan, 1979), as well as the international coordination and action by trade union leaders in the engineering, chemical and food production industries from the 1950s to the 1980s (Bendiner, 1987). A closely related explanation is the presence of MNCs in such sectors, and the need for workers to organize a counter-power (Levinson, 1972). This type of self-interest can be said to apply most directly to industries that are well organized and in the exposed sector of national economies, that is, those most open to foreign competition (Crouch, 1993). For many other industries, however, such as textiles or agriculture, either the absence of MNCs or the lack of union influence in the producing countries makes this form of international solidarity action too difficult and moves international solidarity actions closer to the 'charity' concept of solidarity.

There are of course other forms of self-interest, most notably political self-interest, which was a significant motivation for international trade union affiliation during the Cold War (Carew, 2000), when many national unions sought to further the foreign policy objectives of their own governments. A related form of self-interest could be described as the self-interest of organizations in their own self-preservation, for example through the prestige and the resources made available to trade unions through international affiliation (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000b).

The benefits of affiliation are often not the same for all members, for example IFAs offer different advantages for unions ranging from expanded influence of headquarter unions to basic organizing rights for unions operating in highly restrictive environments (ITUC, 2010). In many cases, particularly in relation to specific campaigns and solidarity action that support one or more national affiliates, the benefits and costs are diverse. This raises an important question about how self-interest and advantage are conceptualized and measured by affiliates. Keohane's (1986) idea of 'diffuse reciprocity' is extremely helpful for explaining how these complex calculations are made by affiliates of the

global unions. Diffuse reciprocity exists when membership of a multilateral organization is expected to yield a rough equivalence of benefits between members in the aggregate and over the long term, rather than short-term pay-offs. This diffuse reciprocity is essential to the principle of solidarity and the daily work of the Global Unions.

The Global Unions provide a unique arena 'where actions take place' (Archer, 2001: 73) through articulating and aggregating interests. This arena provides an opportunity for socialization, particularly important for developing country unions which are often isolated and lack experience of operating at international and often diplomatic levels. Their motivation to join a Global Union is, in part, a 'social-communicative approach' (Caporaso, 1993: 66): affiliation provides an important sense of group identity and an opportunity for dialogue.

However, the size of the Global Unions and the resultant distance from individual members has been an important issue for internal debate. The sectoral GUFs might be considered closer to the base than the confederal ITUC, because the connection from the leadership to the individual member goes through fewer levels. Instead of dealing with national centres which must form common policies out of the disparate elements of their own affiliates, the GUFs only have to deal with individual unions with less diversity of interests. But this advantage may disappear entirely in the case of large multi-sectoral unions, increasingly common with the process of union mergers at national level, and in the recent mergers among the GUFs (for example, the 2000 merger of the FIET, PTIT, IGF and MEI to form UNI). In practice, therefore, for the GUFs as for the ITUC, the distance from the international to the individual worker is very great indeed.

This distance may have an important impact on perceived authority and legitimacy of the Global Unions. Authority and legitimacy are the foundation of trade union power: only if the members are convinced that the union is acting on their behalf, and are willing to apply collective pressure to support its goals can these be achieved. Effective trade unionism requires not just a 'willingness to pay' but also a 'willingness to act' (Offe and Wiesenthal, 1985). At national level, the authority of trade unions depends on their democratic accountability to their members. Martin (1989) has referred to this as internal authority, and Schmitter and Streeck (1999) as the logic of membership. At the same time, to be effective unions must be regarded as representative by outside bodies, such as employers, parties and governments – the logic of influence. External authority can be closely linked to internal authority – if members support the union, employers and governments will also take the union seriously – but there can also be tensions between the two logics, and this is reflected within the Global Unions in conflicts between the priorities of 'agitation' and 'diplomacy' (Hyman, 2005).

At international level the relationship between authority and legitimacy and the willingness of membership to act is complex and, at times, counterintuitive. There is, at times, an evident tension between the broad principles of the international trade union movement and the specific and complex actions required to carry them out. This is clear in the case of solidarity, where the policy itself is embraced but not the specific and demanding actions that need to take place in order for these principles to be upheld. This tension can be understood as an instance of Olson's problem of large numbers: 'the larger the group, the farther it will fall short of providing an optimal amount of a collective

good' (1965: 35). Whatever the limitations of Olson's analysis, it correctly identifies the problem that group identity is not sufficient for the majority of Global Union members to carry out the level of solidarity action that is necessary.

This is in part a reflection of what Kahler (1992) calls the problem of latency: members tend to become passive in large diverse groups, particularly within weak federal structures. Latency occurs when an individual member not contributing to the collective good does not significantly affect any other member, and does not therefore provoke a response or action. Latency can be anticipated within Global Unions, given their complex and often opaque methods of operation and the inability of all but the largest affiliates to exert significant weight: most members may be inclined to withdraw and become passive. This is observable at international meetings, where discussion falls mainly into a diplomatic mode, rarely addressing difficult issues and respecting the relative weight of speakers. The verbatim proceedings of ICFTU congresses indicate that speakers from the largest, most influential western unions tend to speak more, and to speak on more general issues, while those from the developing countries speak mainly on matters directly affecting their country or region (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2004).

Institutional entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions and policy communities

Given the obstacles which typically confront collective action, policy initiatives require effective forms of pressure if they are to succeed. Here, the literature on institutional evolution and change (Thelen, 2004) is of obvious relevance. As a number of writers have argued, new policies and organizational structures – even when necessitated by changed objective circumstances – are typically driven by 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Crouch, 2005) or 'policy entrepreneurs' (Mintrom and Norman, 2009; Moravcsik, 1999). In some readings – particularly influenced by analyses of the formal capacity of the European Commission to initiate new regulatory practices – the key entrepreneur is the supranational executive apparatus; and clearly the elected leaderships of the Global Unions are crucial actors in stimulating (or at times obstructing) radical change. But within any international organization, specific affiliates or members may act in combination as drivers of change, and indeed any effective central leadership needs to build alliances between key members and construct bridges between their priorities and its own. In other words, multilateralism is often centrally constructed.

Initiating radical policy change typically requires a mobilizing discourse which identifies a fundamental challenge and persuasively depicts a solution (Schmidt, 2002). This in turn normally depends on the existence of a 'policy community' (Falkner, 1998; Wright, 1988) and the creation of an 'advocacy coalition' (Sabatier, 1988) which can press for the required policy shift. Such communities and coalitions may vary in composition according to the policy domain involved. Again, these analytical themes have obvious relevance for our understanding of how policies are created and recreated within Global Unions. We develop these perspectives below with our discussion of minilateralism and k-groups.

Regionalism, minilateralism and k-groups

Within large membership organizations there is an evident problem of cooperation across diverse interests and cultures. The smaller the group, the more likely it is that members will reach agreement and be able to coordinate action. In reality, most multilateral organizations are established and governed by a smaller subset of countries, and a common way to do this is through establishing regional cooperation (Oye, 1986: 21).

Regions are not clearly defined or delineated by international organizations and may not share any linguistic or cultural commonalities. As we saw previously, there are differences in the degree of formal autonomy of trade union regional structures, particularly in Europe, but they all essentially follow the principle of subsidiarity. The developing regions are limited in their capacity for independent action because of their financial reliance on wealthier, mainly European and North American, affiliates. The relationship between regions and the global trade union bodies can be understood in terms of federalism, which may assume either strong or weak forms. Federalism (Fleiner et al., 2002) is understood here as a limitation on governmental power, dividing it both horizontally but also vertically between, in this case, regional structures with a clear functional division between national or regional levels and 'supranational' ones (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2008: 326). In the main the affiliates of the Global Unions do not tend to confer more than an absolute minimum of power to the centre, preferring – like most states affiliated to multilateral structures – to maintain a 'weak confederalism' (Stein, 2008) in which core aspects of national sovereignty remain intact. Certainly they agree to pay dues to the international body and accept the collective choice of leadership, although not always with good grace. But in practice they have rarely if ever agreed to delegate any substantial national powers of policy-making or negotiation to their global bodies.

It is important to note that the power structures of the Global Unions are far from unipolar (Jervis, 2009): the US unions, with their low membership density, do not hold a disproportionate share of the 'politically relevant resources of the system' (Walt, 2009: 91), while the European unions do not form a cohesive bloc. Authority, if measured through financial contributions, is widely dispersed across Europe and North America, with important contributions also from Japan and Australia.

If the Western European affiliates that established the Global Unions remain particularly influential, this is not simply a question of economic resources but also of political culture, and the socialist and democratic norms that European trade unions have often embraced. The multilateralism of the Global Unions can be seen as linked to the embeddedness of a unificatory and rule-based approach of Western European nations (Saxer, 2009).

These constellations of influence within the Global Unions are complex and typically involve smaller groupings than the regional, and tend to divide into two main types. The first we can describe as minilateral and the second we describe as k-group cooperation. Multilateral organizations in international relations are 'typically supported by a minilateral cooperation amongst the Atlantic powers' (Kahler, 1992); such small-group collaboration increases the effectiveness and intensity of common action within larger membership groups. K-groups (Snidal, 1985) are subgroups which are small enough for the benefits of cooperation among their members to outweigh the costs, and whose collective action enables agreement on policy and practice.

It is worth noting here that all too easily this can involve an 'in-group' from unions with more resources, more developed transnational networks and typically English-language skills exercising hegemony over affiliates lacking these advantages. Even though the objectives of such groups may be benevolent, it is at best a paternalistic form of solidarity. Wagner (2005: 93) has noted a similar tendency within the ETUC: from the perspective of those outside the informal leadership 'currently solidarities are more like alliances of interest between the rich countries'. Within the ITUC, there are indications that many unions from poorer countries feel similarly excluded from effective policy-making. This evidently corrodes the basis for solidaristic action: hence a major challenge is to develop a democratic, negotiated basis for minilateralism.

The workings of multilateral organizations tend to reflect the politics and political cultures of such groups, as can be observed in many multilateral organizations which rely on working groups, committees and sometimes less formal groups of decision-makers (Olson, 1971). Kahler (1992) calls this 'disguised multilateralism', and identifies two additional and non-hierarchical forms of minilateralism, the 'broker' and the 'progressive club'. Both offer insights into minilateral cooperation within the Global Unions. In the former, a small group creates a focal point for carrying out activity. Often this role will be taken up by a union that, although not in the k-group, has significant political or moral authority. Such a 'broker' may be a 'missionary' (Croucher and Cotton, 2009: 55) or a 'policy entrepreneur', promoting particular issues and actions within the multilateral structure and vying for support.

A progressive club is a group of members with an agenda transcending the lowest common denominator. It could be understood using Olmsted's (1959) sociological concept of a primary group: members have close personal ties and associate face-to-face. Their relationship is based on a profound sense of solidarity, which is both political and emotional. Their shared perception of reality is reinforced through continuous contact and joint creation of norms, roles and cultures. This is captured by Bales (1950: 79–80): 'the heart of solidarity in the institutionalized sense is the stabilized mutual responsibility of each toward the other . . . as the sharer of a common fate, and as a person who is under obligation to cooperate with the other in the satisfaction of the other's individual needs as if they were one's own'.

Significant small groups within the Global Unions are those unions active in education work, both those that fund and support educational projects (particularly from the Netherlands and the Nordic countries), and those in the developing world that work in partnership with them. This is a distinct and important group within the Global Unions, not just because of their intense and involved work together but also because of the political impact of carrying out workers' education and the relationships it engenders. We would argue that the level of small group cooperation based on progressive and politically important educational principles is a major progressive force within the Global Unions. Educational settings provide strong social incentives and crucial socialization between unions, often from different regions, sufficient to shift the perception of self-interest and increase willingness to contribute to the collective good. An example of a 'missionary' group would be the individuals and unions that pushed the Global Unions and their affiliates to become more active around the issue of gender equality from the 1970s onwards. Again, the Nordic unions as well as the TUC and the German DGB

played a leading role, as did particular individuals within the ICFTU secretariat. The development of international trade union action around the MNCs followed a similar process, mainly on the basis of the joint ICFTU-ITS (International Trade Secretariat) Working Party on Multinational Enterprises with membership largely drawn from the same countries plus the United States and Canada (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2000b).

Most unions in developing regions are isolated from their counterparts elsewhere. It is an important benefit to join a Global Union, because of the exposure it brings to trade unionism more broadly and the pool of collective experience on which it is possible to draw. One of the key functions of the Global Unions, particularly in trade union education settings, is to gather and distribute experiences both of failure and, less often, success – providing crucial strategic and technical knowledge that can be used internationally.

Conclusion

We have attempted to deepen understanding of the international trade union movement by applying an international relations framework, using the concepts of multilateralism and minilateralism. This helps us understand not only the difficulties that Global Unions face in engaging with and mobilizing their large memberships, but also the relative durability of these structures in the face of declining financial resources. We have used the multilateralism concept to explain their adaptability, deepened it by introducing the concept of minilateralism to characterize the small-group cooperation that they exhibit. It is through such minilateral cooperation that sufficiently robust and involved relationships are formed to carry out demanding international work.

The perspective we have proposed should be at the heart of any diagnosis of the profound organizational problems that the Global Unions now face. By such understanding we hope to stimulate additional impetus for affiliates to make the ultimately political decision to strengthen and democratize their international structures.

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Author biographies

Elizabeth Cotton is a senior lecturer at Middlesex University Business School. Her academic background is in political philosophy and her current teaching and writing includes precarious work and employment relations, sustainability and mental health at work. She has worked as an activist and educator in over 30 countries, working with trade unions and Global Union Federations at senior level including the ICEM as Head of Programmes. Some of this work is reflected in her co-authored publication, *Global Unions Global Business*, described as ‘the essential guide to global trade unionism’ (Libri Publishing, 2nd edn, 2011). Elizabeth lived and worked abroad until returning to the UK in 2007 to write and start the process of training in adult psychotherapy.

Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick is a lecturer in the Department of Management at Birkbeck, University of London. She is a former official of the International Union of Food and Allied Workers (IUF) and of the International Labour Office (ILO). Rebecca specializes in European and international industrial relations, trade unions and equality. She is currently working on a book with Richard Hyman on their recently completed research project on trade unions in 10 Western European countries, for Oxford University Press.